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**BAKUNIN
&
NECHAEV**

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&
NECHAEV

by
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Note

The Nechaev period of Michael Bakunin's career (1869-1872) was relatively brief. Yet, apart from being a fascinating psychological drama, it forms an important chapter in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement, posing fundamental questions of revolutionary tactics and revolutionary morality with which radicals have continued to grapple to this day. Bakunin's relationship with Nechaev was also a contributing factor in his famous conflict with Marx and his expulsion from the First International. And it led him to a re-examination of his revolutionary doctrines and to a reassertion of his libertarian principles as against what he called the "Jesuitism" and "Machiavellianism" of his young disciple. We are therefore greatly indebted to Arthur Lehning and Michael Confino (see Bibliographical Note) for making available the necessary materials for a reappraisal of the Nechaev affair, which is the object of the present essay.

BAKUNIN & NECHAEV

1. *Nechaev and Russian Jacobinism*

Sergei Gennadievich Nechaev was born on September 20, 1847, at Ivanovo, a growing textile town northeast of Moscow that was beginning to acquire the reputation of a "Russian Manchester". His father was a sign painter, his mother a seamstress, and both were of serf origin, so that Nechaev was one of the first prominent Russian radicals with a thoroughly plebeian background. He was "not a product of our world", wrote Vera Zasulich in her memoirs, but was "a stranger among us". As a son of the people, however, he was all the more impressive in the eyes of his fellow revolutionists, repentant noblemen who yearned to repay their debt to the lower classes. An acquaintance called Nechaev "a real revolutionist, a peasant who has preserved all the serf's hatred against his masters", a hatred that was to be turned even against his own comrades, with their aristocratic birth and education.

In April 1866, at the age of 18, Nechaev left Ivanovo for St. Petersburg, where he taught for a time in a parochial school. In the fall of 1868 he enrolled in the university as a non-matriculating student, and he joined a group of young revolutionaries that included such future anarchists as Z. K. Ralli, V. N. Cherkezov, and F. V. Volkhovsky, as well as such near anarchists or libertarian socialists as Mark Natanson, German Lopatin, and L. B. Goldenberg. Though Nechaev as yet knew no French, he attended discussions of Buonarroti's history of Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals, a book which helped to shape a whole generation of Russian rebels, and his dreams were soon dominated by secret societies and the conspiratorial life. He found himself irresistibly drawn to Jacobinism and Blanquism, and when he later visited Ralli in Switzerland, he was carrying books by Rousseau and Robespierre, and his authoritarian tendencies, his pretence of knowing "the general will" and of "forcing the people to be free", were already well developed.

Nechaev was also attracted by the Jacobin tradition within the Russian revolutionary movement itself, a tradition dating back to the Decembrist leader Pestel in the 1820s and to Nicholas Speshnev in the 1840s, who emphasized the need for conspiratorial tactics and a revolutionary dictatorship based, as he put it, on the "Jesuit" model, a suggestion which led the Fourierist Michael Petrashevsky to declare: "I would be the first to raise my hand against the dictator." In 1862, four years before Nechaev's arrival in St. Petersburg, a clandestine leaflet called *Young Russia* was issued by Peter Zaichnevsky, a leading Russian Jacobin who was influenced by Robespierre and Babeuf and by Mazzini and the Italian Carbonari (the title of his leaflet is derived from Young Italy) with their methods of revolutionary conspiracy. His ultimate goal, however, was inspired by the decentralized socialism of Proudhon, and when the police came to arrest him they found an unfinished Russian translation of *What Is Property?* among his papers.

In *Young Russia* Zaichnevsky called for a "bloody and pitiless" revolution on the model of Razin and Pugachev, and for the merciless annihilation of the tsarist family and its supporters: "We will cry 'To your axes' and then we will strike the imperial party without sparing our blows just as they do not spare theirs against us. We will destroy them in the squares, if the cowardly swine dare to go there. We will destroy them in their houses, in the narrow streets of the towns, in the broad avenues of the capital, and in the villages. Remember that, when this happens, anyone who is not with us is against us, and an enemy, and that every method is used to destroy an enemy." Herzen was repelled by the ruthlessness and crude immoralism of the leaflet, and even Bakunin condemned its author for his "mad and really doctrinaire scorn for the people", yet *Young Russia* exerted a powerful influence among the youth of Nechaev's generation, the "men of the sixties", who were inspired by its defiant and uncompromising rhetoric.

Another source of inspiration was the character of Rakhmetov in Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which appeared in 1864. Rakhmetov was the literary prototype of the new revolutionary, a man possessed and living a pure ascetic life, subjecting himself to intense physical privations in preparation for his revolutionary role. To harden himself he eats raw meat

and sleeps on a bed of nails. He has no personal life, no wife, no friends, no family ties that might deflect him from his purpose. He adopts a deliberately brusque manner of conversation and behaviour both to cut himself off from conventional society and to avoid wasting time on empty words and formalities. He uses his money not for personal needs but to help impoverished students and the revolutionary cause.

The figure of Rakhmetov gripped the imagination of young revolutionaries for decades to come (in 1892 Alexander Berkman used "Rakhmetov" as his cover name when he went to shoot Henry Clay Frick). During the mid-1860s Rakhmetov served as a model for the Ishutin Circle, whose members (including Kropotkin's future comrade, Varlaam Cherkhezov, and Dmitri Karakozov, whose attempt on the tsar in 1866 was hailed by Nechaev as "the beginning of our sacred cause") renounced all personal pleasures and led rigorously ascetic lives, sleeping on floors, giving all their money to the cause, and devoting all their energies to the liberation of the people. They also exhibited a strong anti-intellectual bias, scorning the university for training "generals of culture" rather than helpers of the workers and peasants. Some even abandoned their studies and organized co-operatives. As one member remarked, "the masses are uneducated; therefore we have no right to an education. You don't need much learning to explain to the people that they are being cheated and robbed". Like Zaichnevsky, they rejected reforms or palliatives and despised the older generation of radicals, the "men of the forties" exemplified by Herzen and his circle, as impotent men who, for all their erudition and revolutionary phrases, were powerless to break with the old order or with their own aristocratic roots. They called, again like Zaichnevsky, for the extermination of the tsarist family in order to spark off a social upheaval, a Pugachev revolt which would bring the existing order to dust.

To carry out this task a small group called Hell was organized within the Ishutin Circle, an ascetic cadre of terrorists shrouded in secrecy and leading an anonymous underground existence. Every member of Hell considered himself a doomed man, cut off from normal society and dedicated entirely to the revolution. He must give up his friends, his family, his personal life, even his name in total self-effacement for the cause. In Ishutin's words (later to be echoed by Nechaev) he must "live with one single

exclusive aim", the emancipation of the lower classes. To accomplish this end every means was permitted, including theft, blackmail, even murder, not to speak of fraud, deception, the denunciation of innocent people, or the infiltration of rival secret societies to gain control over them—all under strict revolutionary discipline, the violation of which carried a penalty of death. One member even considered poisoning his own father and giving his inheritance to the cause; and plans were made for robberies—later to be called "expropriations"—of commercial and government establishments. The main object, however, was the assassination of the tsar and his officials. The deed once done, the terrorist must carry out the ultimate gesture of self-annihilation by squeezing a pellet of fulminate of mercury between his teeth—Berkman tried to do this after his attempt on Frick—so that the police would never know his true identity. Ishutin, who was inspired by Orsini's attempt on Napoleon III, spread it about that Hell was merely the Russian section of a European-wide revolutionary organization whose purpose was to eliminate monarchs everywhere, thus pioneering a technique of mystification that Nechaev would develop into a fine art.

Still another link in the chain of Russian Jacobinism, a chain which extended from Pestel to Lenin, was Peter Tkachev, who maintained that a successful revolution could be brought about only by a closely knit elite which "must have intellectual and moral power over the majority" and whose organization demanded "centralization, strict discipline, speed, decisiveness, and coordination of activities". Zaichnevsky, it is worth noting, became one of Tkachev's most steadfast supporters, remaining faithful to his Jacobin principles to the end of his life; and in 1869 Nechaev collaborated with Tkachev in drafting *A Programme of Revolutionary Action* that called for an organization of "revolutionary prototypes" who would operate, like the Ishutin Circle, according to the principle that the revolutionary end justifies any and all means. "Those who join the organization," they wrote, "must give up every possession, occupation, or family tie, because families and occupations might distract members from their activities." Again like Ishutin, they envisioned a union of all European revolutionary organizations, with a centre in the West, and it is perhaps with this in mind that Nechaev went to Switzerland in 1869 when he first met Michael Bakunin.

2. *The Catechism of the Revolutionary*

Before leaving Russia, Nechaev began his career of mystification and deception. In March 1869 Vera Zasulich received an anonymous letter with the following words: "When walking today on the Vasilevsky Island, I saw a carriage conveying prisoners. A hand reached out of the window and dropped a note. At the same time I heard the following words: 'If you are a student, deliver this to the indicated address.' I am a student and consider it my duty to comply with the request. Destroy my letter." The accompanying note, in Nechaev's hand, informed his friends that he had been arrested and was being taken to the Peter and Paul fortress. Soon after this, a rumour was circulated that he had escaped from the fortress—an unprecedented feat—and was on his way to the West. Yet in fact there had been no escape, nor even an arrest. It was all a fabrication, the first of a whole series of escapades invented by Nechaev to build himself up as a hero, to surround himself with an aura of mystery, and to cast himself in the role of the "revolutionary prototype" of his and Tkachev's *Programme of Revolutionary Action*.

Nechaev crossed the Russian frontier on March 4, 1869. On reaching Geneva, he immediately called on Bakunin, claiming to represent a powerful revolutionary organization within the tsarist empire. Bakunin was at once infatuated with this "young savage", this "tiger cub", as he called Nechaev. "I have here with me," he wrote to James Guillaume on April 13, 1869, "one of those young fanatics who know no doubts, who fear nothing . . . believers without God, heroes without rhetoric." He saw in Nechaev the ideal revolutionary conspirator, the herald of a new generation whose energy, determination, and intransigence would overthrow the imperial order. Nechaev's arrival in Switzerland, as E. H. Carr has observed, gave the ageing Bakunin a new

lease on life, a rebirth of revolutionary hope, and a breath of his native land, which he would never see again. For Bakunin, as Professor Confino puts it, "Nechaev was Russian youth, revolutionary Russia, Russia itself."

During the spring and summer of 1869, Bakunin and Nechaev issued a series of pamphlets and manifestos calling for a social upheaval in Russia. In *Some Words to Our Young Brothers in Russia* Bakunin exhorted the revolutionary youth to "go to the people" with a message of rebellion, to rouse them to a life-and-death struggle against the state and the privileged classes, following the model set by Stenka Razin two centuries before. "Young men of education must become not the people's benefactors, not its dictators and guides, but merely a lever for the people to free itself, the unifier of the people's own energies and forces," Bakunin declared. "Take notice of learning, in whose name men try to shackle you and strip you of your power. Learning of this kind must die together with the world of which it is an expression."

A similar proclamation *To the Students of the University, the Academy, and the Technical Institute* was drafted by Nechaev, and another called *Russian Students* by Nicholas Ogarev, a close associate of Herzen and Bakunin. The rest—*How the Revolutionary Question Presents Itself*, *Principles of Revolution*, and *Publications of the Society of 'The People's Justice'*, No. 1 (consisting of two articles dated Summer 1869)—were all unsigned and their authorship has not been conclusively determined. Extolling indiscriminate destruction in the name of the revolution, they preached the justification of every means by the revolutionary end. *How the Revolution Presents Itself* is noteworthy for its eulogy of banditry in distinctively Bakuninist terms: "The brigand in Russia is the only true revolutionary—the revolutionary without phrase-making, without bookish rhetoric, the irreconcilable, indefatigable, indomitable revolutionary of the deed. . . . The anniversaries of Stenka Razin and Pugachev are approaching; let us prepare for the feast."

The authorship of *Principles of Revolution* (which seems to be the work of Nechaev) is especially important because of its strong stylistic resemblance to *The Catechism of the Revolutionary*: "We recognize no other activity but the work of extermination, but we admit that the forms which this activity will take will

be extremely varied—poison, the knife, the rope, etc. In this struggle the revolution sanctifies everything alike." *The People's Justice* No. 1, with its appeals for peasant rebellion à la Razin and Pugachev and criticisms of the "unasked-for teachers" of the people whose learning has sapped them of their life-giving "popular juices", bears the earmarks of both Bakunin and Nechaev, though its appeal to the example of Ishutin sounds more like the "young savage": "Ishutin has taken the initiative; and now it is time for us to begin, before his hot tracks have cooled." Professor Confino, unfortunately, says nothing about the authorship of these unsigned proclamations, and one hopes that Arthur Lehning will shed fresh light on the question in his forthcoming volume on 1869.

It was during this period between April and August 1869 that the notorious *Catechism of the Revolutionary* was written, the object of heated controversy and discussion ever since. Fore-shadowed by earlier documents of the European revolutionary movement, it expresses ideas and sentiments that had already been propounded by Zaichnevsky and Ishutin in Russia and by the Carbonari and Young Italy in the West. Yet by carrying to an ultimate extreme the ruthlessness and immorality of its predecessors, it constitutes the fullest statement of a revolutionary creed that has occupied a prominent place in revolutionary history for more than a century. In the *Catechism* the revolutionary is depicted as a complete immoralist, bound to commit any crime, any treachery, any baseness or deception to bring about the destruction of the existing order. Because of this, Nicolas Walter has denounced it as a "revolting rather than revolutionary document", the expression of "pure, total, fanatical, destructive, nihilistic, self-defeating revolutionism".

The *Catechism* is divided into two parts: (1) General Rules of the Organization, consisting of 22 numbered paragraphs, and (2) Rules of Conduct of Revolutionaries, with 26 paragraphs under three headings: The Attitude of the Revolutionary Towards Himself, The Attitude of the Revolutionary Towards His Revolutionary Comrades, and The Attitude of the Revolutionary Towards Society. Part Two, which is the famous part, has been widely published in many languages and editions, while Part One, to my knowledge, has never been translated into English, though a full French translation is included in the Confino volume listed

in the Bibliographical Note. The original version of the *Catechism*, written in cipher in Latin characters, was taken back to Russia by Nechaev in August 1869. It was found by the police during a roundup of Nechaev's followers three months later and was used as evidence against them in their trial. The original manuscript, which was first published in *Pravitel'stvennyi Vestnik* (Government Herald) in July 1871, was lost in a fire in the Ministry of Justice in 1917; but the text was reprinted in 1924 in the journal *Bor'ba Klassov* (Class Struggle) from a copy found in the archives of the tsarist secret police.

Part Two of the *Catechism* was published in French by the Marxists in 1873, during their campaign against Bakunin in the First International. The first English translation was published in 1939 in Max Nomad's *Apostles of Revolution*, and another appeared in 1957 in Robert Payne's *The Terrorists* (reprinted in 1967 in an expanded version of the book called *The Fortress*). There are extensive excerpts in Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution* (1960); and between 1969 and 1971 at least three editions appeared in pamphlet form, the first issued by the Black Panther party in Berkeley, California, with an introduction by Eldridge Cleaver, the second by Kropotkin Lighthouse Publications in London with a preface by Nicolas Walter (both reproducing the Nomad translation), and in a new translation as Red Pamphlet No. 01 with an unsigned preface and no place of publication indicated.

"The revolutionary is a doomed man," begins Part Two of the *Catechism* in language reminiscent of Ishutin. "He has no personal interests, no affairs, no sentiments, attachments, property, not even a name of his own. Everything in him is absorbed by one exclusive interest, one thought, one passion—the revolution" (Paragraph 1). He studies chemistry and other physical sciences for the purpose of destroying his enemies (Paragraph 3). He has severed all connections with the social order, with the world of education, and with conventional morality. "To him whatever aids the triumph of the revolution is ethical; all that hinders it is unethical and criminal" (Paragraph 4). "All tender, softening sentiments of kinship, friendship, love, gratitude, and even honour itself must be snuffed out in him by the one cold passion of the revolutionary cause. For him there is only one satisfaction, consolation, and delight—the success of the revolution. Day

and night he must have one thought, one aim—inexorable destruction. Striving coldly and unfalteringly towards this aim, he must be ready to perish himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that hinders its realization" (Paragraph 6). The revolutionary organization must draw up a list of persons to be exterminated (Paragraph 15), and "those men must be destroyed who are particularly harmful to the revolutionary organization" (Paragraph 16). The revolutionary must trap those with money or influence and "turn them into one's slaves" (Paragraph 18). As for liberals, "one should take hold of them, get possession of all their secrets, compromise them to the utmost, so that no avenue of escape may be left to them" (Paragraph 19). The final paragraphs repeat the incendiary message of *Some Words to Our Young Brothers, How the Revolutionary Question Presents Itself*, and *Principles of Revolution*: "Our business is destruction, terrible, complete, universal, and merciless" (Paragraph 24). "Let us join hands with the bold world of bandits—the only genuine revolutionists in Russia" (Paragraph 25).

The authorship of the *Catechism* has been a subject of prolonged and bitter dispute. In the absence of conclusive evidence, scholars hostile to the anarchists have usually attributed it to Bakunin, while others have attributed it to Nechaev, and still others to both men as a product of their collaboration during 1869. Thus the Kropotkin Lighthouse edition gives Nechaev as the author, while both the Black Panther and Red Pamphlet editions list Bakunin, the anonymous editor of the latter insisting that "the myth that Nechaev wrote it was invented by petty bourgeois pseudo-'anarchists' who were revisionists from Bakunin". Such eminent scholars as Max Nettlau, E. H. Carr, and Franco Venturi in the West, and B. P. Kozmin in the Soviet Union, have attributed the *Catechism* to Bakunin, as have Bakunin's own associates Z. K. Ralli and Michael Sazhin ("Armand Ross"), who claimed to have seen a copy of the manuscript in Bakunin's handwriting. Some, including Carr, have argued that the *Catechism* carries echoes of Bakunin's style and that the catechism was one of Bakunin's favourite forms of composition (he had published a *Revolutionary Catechism* in 1866). On the other hand, the catechism as a literary form was widely used by revolutionaries in both Russia and the West throughout the nineteenth century. Professor Confino, moreover, maintains that a com-

parison of *The Catechism of the Revolutionary* with Bakunin's earlier *Revolutionary Catechism* shows that they are "radically dissimilar" in style and terminology. In both style and content, rather, the former seems to have emerged from the milieu of student revolutionism inside Russia during the 1860s—a milieu in which Bakunin unlike Nechaev played no part—rather than from among the older generation of exiles in Switzerland.

Important new evidence on this question is contained in a letter from Bakunin to Nechaev of June 2-9, 1870, located in the Natalie Herzen Archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and first published by Confino in 1966 in the *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*. It is the longest and most interesting letter that Bakunin ever wrote, requiring eight days to complete and occupying more than thirty pages of closely printed text. It forms the centrepiece of both Lehning's and Confino's volumes, and we shall have more to say about it later. In it Bakunin specifically repudiates what he calls "your catechism", along with Nechaev's whole "Jesuitical system". On the basis of this statement the *Catechism* must now be attributed to Nechaev, although it is by no means certain that Bakunin had no role in its composition or revision. For it was written during a period of intimate co-operation between the two men, and even if the burden of authorship was in fact Nechaev's, Bakunin may still have helped with the writing or editing. This, indeed, would account for the occasional Bakunist phraseology as well as for the alleged existence of a copy in Bakunin's handwriting. Bakunin's letter to Nechaev of June 2, 1870, acknowledges that he was familiar with it at the time of its composition—a time when he was extremely susceptible to Nechaev's influence—and, significantly, he raised no known protest against it until his falling-out with Nechaev a year later.

3. *The Ivanov Affair*

Before Nechaev returned to Russia with the manuscript of the *Catechism*, he had already begun to carry out its provisions. Having already deceived his revolutionary comrades with the fake story of his arrest and escape, he now sent incriminating letters and revolutionary literature to his more moderate acquaintances in Russia in order to compromise them with the authorities and, in accordance with Paragraphs 18 and 19 of the *Catechism*, to involve them more deeply in radical activity. Between March and August 1869 no less than 560 items involving 387 persons were intercepted in St. Petersburg alone. Following the same principle, Nechaev would later steal private letters and papers from Bakunin and his circle in order to exert pressure on them, and would even carry out murder so as to bind his accomplices to his will. All this was part of a system of total disregard for decency and fairness which has gone down in revolutionary history under the name of "Nechaevism".

Meanwhile, Bakunin had indulged in a bit of mystification of his own. In May 1869 he issued Nechaev with a certificate designating him as "one of the accredited representatives of the Russian Section of the World Revolutionary Alliance, No. 2771". Signed by Bakunin, it bore the seal of the "European Revolutionary Alliance, Central Committee", a mere invention—similar to that already used by Ishutin and Nechaev—designed to create the impression of a worldwide network of revolutionaries. "Thus did Nechaev, the self-styled representative of a probably non-existent Russian revolutionary committee, receive from Bakunin authority to act in Russia as the representative of a non-existent European Revolutionary Alliance," E. H. Carr wryly comments. "It was a delicious situation which can have few parallels either in comedy or in history." To add further to Nechaev's prestige, Bakunin persuaded Ogarev to dedicate a poem, written for a student who had died a martyr's death in Siberia, to his "young

friend Nechaev". The poem was printed as a leaflet, and by the fall of 1869 it was circulated in Russia where it helped to build up the Nechaev legend.

At the end of August 1869 Nechaev returned to Russia armed with the poem, the *Catechism*, and the blessings of Bakunin and Ogarev. Arriving in Moscow he proceeded to organize a revolutionary society called The People's Justice—the same name as the brochure published in Geneva—on lines prescribed in the *Catechism*. It was a secret, disciplined association organized in groups of "revolutionary fives" (as with Ishutin's Hell and the first Land and Liberty organization of the 1860s as well as secret societies throughout Western Europe) with each member owing implicit obedience to a leader, who in turn took his orders from a central committee. Its chief aim was to unleash a popular upheaval on February 19, 1870, the ninth anniversary of the emancipation of the serfs, and its official seal was an axe with the words "Committee of The People's Justice of February 19, 1870". The organization was dominated by the person of Nechaev who, as all sources agree, demanded complete and unquestioning obedience from his comrades, to whom he issued orders in the name of a non-existent central committee. Nechaev set the members spying on one another and encouraged the use of extortion and blackmail to obtain money for the cause.

Such methods apparently proved too repugnant to one of the ablest members of the organization, a student at the Petrovsk Agricultural Academy with the improbable name of Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov. Ivanov seems to have been an honourable and intelligent member of the circle at the Academy who was active in student co-operatives, spent time teaching children of peasants, and exercised considerable influence among his revolutionary comrades. At some point he evidently objected to Nechaev's orders, questioned the existence of the central committee in whose name Nechaev claimed to speak, and may even have threatened to form a new revolutionary group on more democratic lines, something that Nechaev would hardly tolerate. At all events, Nechaev managed to convince some of his followers that Ivanov was planning to inform on them, and that, in accordance with Paragraph 16 of the *Catechism* ("those men must be destroyed who are particularly harmful to the revolutionary organization"), it was necessary to do away with him.

On the night of November 21, 1869, Ivanov was lured to a grotto in the park of the Agricultural Academy on the pretext of unearthing a clandestine printing press. There he was set upon and beaten by Nechaev and four accomplices. Nechaev tried to strangle him but was bitten very severely on the hand, whereupon he drew a pistol and shot Ivanov in the head. The body was weighed down with stones and dumped through an ice-hole in a nearby pond. In this way Nechaev removed a potential adversary, while at the same time incriminating his comrades to ensure their obedience to his authority. It was an extreme example of his technique of gaining compliance through involving his comrades in crime. Their sole victim, however, was not an agent of the autocracy but one of their own number who had aroused the leader's antagonism.

The murder of Ivanov created a great sensation. Dostoevsky used the incident as the plot for his novel *The Demons* (*The Possessed*), with Verkhovensky representing Nechaev to Shatov's Ivanov. The discovery of Ivanov's body four days after the murder led to the arrest of some 300 revolutionaries and finally to the trial of 84 *Nechaevtsy* in the summer of 1871. One of the condemned was Peter Lavrov's son-in-law, Michael Negreskul, who had previously opposed Nechaev's tactics in St. Petersburg and who was among those whom Nechaev had sought to compromise by sending revolutionary proclamations from Switzerland. Negreskul was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul fortress, fell ill with consumption, and finally died under house arrest in February 1870. Nechaev, meanwhile, had slipped out of Moscow for St. Petersburg, where he obtained a false passport and succeeded in crossing the border in December 1869, leaving his comrades behind to take the rap.

4. *The Falling-Out*

On January 12, 1870, Bakunin, who was then living in Locarno, received a letter from Ogarev announcing that Nechaev had arrived in Geneva. Bakunin jumped for joy so violently that he "nearly broke the ceiling with his aged head". A short while later Nechaev came to Locarno and the two men resumed their collaboration, issuing two manifestos to the Russian nobility, the first probably written by Bakunin and the second by Nechaev. Nechaev also published a second number of *The People's Justice* (dated Winter 1870), as well as six issues of *The Bell* in April and May 1870.

To finance these ventures Nechaev used money from the so-called Bakhmetiev fund, left to Alexander Herzen by a young Russian nobleman who in 1858 went to the South Pacific to found a utopian community. When Herzen met Nechaev in Geneva in 1869 he instinctively disliked him. But under pressure from Bakunin and Ogarev, he relinquished half of the fund, a good part of which passed to Nechaev, who used it to finance his revolutionary activities when he returned to Russia. When Herzen died in January 1870, Bakunin urged Ogarev to claim the balance of the fund from Herzen's family. Herzen's son handed it over, and from Ogarev nearly all of it went to Nechaev, who refused to sign a receipt but accepted it in the name of his non-existent central committee.

About the same time, Bakunin was having financial troubles of his own. He had accepted a commission from a Russian publisher named Poliakov to translate Marx's *Kapital* and had been paid an advance of 300 roubles, but he was unable to make any headway with the project. On February 17, 1870, Nechaev wrote a threatening letter to a Russian student named Liubavin, who had acted as an intermediary between Bakunin and Poliakov, demanding that Bakunin be left alone and be released from all claims upon him. The letter, written on stationery of the Central

Committee of The People's Justice and adorned with an axe, a dagger, and a pistol, was later used by Marx to discredit Bakunin and have him expelled from the International.

Before long, however, relations between Bakunin and Nechaev began to deteriorate. The ensuing rift, as Lehning and Confino show, was a complicated affair involving psychological, financial, political, moral, and ideological considerations. During his second sojourn in Switzerland Nechaev's attitude towards Bakunin was not the same as it had been a year earlier. According to Ralli, he no longer showed any deference to his mentor. On the contrary, he demanded that notice be taken of him as the only person with a serious revolutionary organization. He dealt more and more brusquely with Bakunin, even denying him money from the Bakhmetiev fund for his day-to-day needs. He complained to Sazhin that Bakunin no longer had "the level of energy and self-abnegation" required of a true revolutionary, a reflection of the conflict of generations—of the sons against the fathers, the "men of the sixties" against the "men of the forties"—within the populist movement. He began, indeed, to treat Bakunin as the *Catechism* said liberals ought to be treated after one had gotten out of them all that one could. He sought to impose on Bakunin and his friends his own authoritarian methods, going so far as to steal their private papers in order to blackmail or manipulate them in the future ("one should take hold of them, get possession of all their secrets, compromise them to the utmost, so that no avenue of escape may be left to them"—Paragraph 19 of the *Catechism*).

Bakunin's disillusionment was shattering. His pride had suffered dearly for his infatuation with the "Boy". "If you introduce him to a friend, he will immediately proceed to sow dissension, scandal, and intrigue between you and your friend and make you quarrel," Bakunin wrote. "If your friend has a wife or a daughter, he will try to seduce her and get her with child in order to snatch her from the power of conventional morality and plunge her despite herself into revolutionary protest against society." (Such was precisely Nechaev's behaviour towards Natalie Herzen, as described in her diary.) Meanwhile, German Lopatin had arrived from Russia and was telling the truth about Ivanov's murder, explaining that the scars on Nechaev's finger were the death-marks of his victim, and exposing the fiction

of Nechaev's central committee and of his boasted escape from the fortress.

The climax of the dispute came with the letter from Bakunin to Nechaev of June 2, 1870, an English translation of which (by Lydia Bott) was published in *Encounter* magazine in July and August 1972 with a note by Professor Confino. The letter was not "discovered" by Confino, as *Encounter* states, though he was indeed the first to publish it. Its existence in the Bibliothèque Nationale had been previously known, and Arthur Lehning had examined it in 1962 along with other pertinent documents in the Natalie Herzen Archives. Moreover the *Encounter* note by Confino is mistaken in saying that it is the only letter from Bakunin to Nechaev still extant, as there is a short one of May 11, 1870, in the Lehning volume. Confino is nevertheless correct to call it one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of the nineteenth-century revolutionary movement. For it not only throws light on the authorship of the famous *Catechism*, but it also clarifies the reasons for Bakunin's break with Nechaev, helps us to understand their differing views on secret organizations, and, above all, illuminates the question of revolutionary ethics—of the relationship between means and ends—which revolutionists everywhere have continued to face.

Bakunin, expressing his disappointment and almost unbearable humiliation, writes with great feeling and power. He complains to Nechaev of having had "complete faith in you, while you duped me. I turned out to be a complete fool. This is painful and shameful for a man of my experience and age. Worse than this, I spoilt my situation with regard to the Russian and International causes". On the question of revolution Bakunin firmly rejects Nechaev's Jacobinism and Blanquism—his belief in the seizure of power by a revolutionary minority and the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship—calling instead for a spontaneous mass upheaval by the people themselves: "I am deeply convinced that any other revolution is dishonest, harmful, and spells death to liberty and the people."

What then is the role of a revolutionary organization? Nechaev's conception is false, preparing new "exploiters of the people", killing "all feeling of personal fairness", and "educating them in lying, suspicion, spying, and denunciation". The true revolutionary organization, says Bakunin, "does not foist upon the

people any new regulations, orders, styles of life, but merely unleashes their will and gives wide scope to their self-determination and their economic and social organization, which must be created by themselves from below and not from above". The revolutionary organization must "make impossible after the popular victory the establishment of any state power over the people—even the most revolutionary, even your power—because any power, whatever it calls itself, would inevitably subject the people to old slavery in new form". "I love you deeply and still love you", Bakunin writes, but you must repudiate your "false Jesuit system", your "system of deceit, which is increasingly becoming your sole system, your main weapon and means, [and] is fatal to the cause itself".

Such was Bakunin's plea to his wayward disciple. Yet his own rejection of "Nechaevism" was far from complete. For all his disillusionment, his attitude towards Nechaev remained ambivalent. Nechaev, in his eyes, remained a devoted revolutionary who acted while others merely talked, and whose energy, perseverance, audacity, and will-power still exerted an enormous appeal. "You are a passionate and dedicated man," writes Bakunin to Nechaev. "This is your strength, your valour, and your justification." If you alter your methods, he adds, "I wish not only to remain allied with you, but to make this union even closer and firmer." Bakunin sent a similar message to Ogarev and his associates: "The main thing for the moment is to save our erring and confused friend. In spite of all, he remains a valuable man, and there are few valuable men in the world. . . . We love him, we believe in him, we foresee that his future activity will be of immense benefit to the people. That is why we must divert him from his false and disastrous path."

Thus, for all his wounded pride, for all his disapproval of Nechaev's principles and tactics, so strong was Bakunin's affection for his "tiger cub" that he was unable to break decisively with him—notwithstanding the lies and humiliations, the unbridled immorality of the *Catechism*, and even the murder of Ivanov. Then, too, there remained much common ground between them. Their programme, admitted Bakunin, had been "truly identical". It was only after Nechaev had begun to employ his devious methods against Bakunin himself that he expressed his revulsion against them.

Bakunin no less than Nechaev had a passion for conspiracies and secret organizations. For all his assaults on revolutionary dictatorship, he was himself a tireless advocate of a close-knit revolutionary association bound together by implicit obedience to a revolutionary leader. Bakunin's uncritical admirers are unconvincing when they maintain that his references to "iron discipline" or to an "invisible dictatorship" are isolated and uncharacteristic, either antedating the period when his anarchist theories were fully developed or being expressed while he was under Nechaev's pernicious influence. On the contrary, conspiracy was a central thread in his entire revolutionary career. Not for nothing did he praise Buonarroti as "the greatest conspirator of his age".

Throughout his adult life, from the 1840s until the 1870s, Bakunin sought to create clandestine societies modelled on those in the West. In 1845 he became a Freemason. And in 1848 he called for a secret organization of three to five man groups which were "subject to a strict hierarchy and unconditional obedience to a central control". Nor did he abandon this goal in subsequent years. During the 1860s he founded a whole series of secret societies—the Florentine Brotherhood (1864), the International Brotherhood (1866), the International Alliance of Social Democracy (1868)—and elaborated rules governing their membership's behaviour. The organization was to act as "a sort of general staff", working "invisibly on the masses" and remaining intact even after the revolution had been accomplished, in order to forestall the establishment of any "official dictatorship". It would itself exercise a "collective dictatorship", a dictatorship "without any badge, without title, without official right, and the more powerful because it lacks the appearance of power". Its members, declared Bakunin in language reminiscent of the *Catechism*, must submit to "strict discipline", breaches of which were to be considered a "crime" punishable by "expulsion combined with delivery to the vengeance of all the members". As late as 1872 he could still write: "Our goal is the creation of a powerful but always invisible organization, which must prepare the revolution and lead it."

The same position is taken in his letter to Nechaev. The popular revolution, he repeats, must be "invisibly led, not by an official dictatorship, but by a nameless and collective one,

composed of those in favour of total people's liberation from all oppression, firmly united in a secret society and always and everywhere acting in support of a common aim and in accordance with a common programme". He calls the revolutionary organization "the staff of the people's army" and adds, again in the language of the *Catechism*, that it must be composed of persons "who are passionately and undeviatingly devoted, who have, as far as possible, renounced all personal interests and have renounced once and for all, for life or for death itself, all that attracts people, all material comforts and delights, all satisfaction of ambition, status, and fame. . . . They must be totally and wholly absorbed by one passion, the people's liberation".

The organization, moreover, must have an executive committee and require strict discipline of its members. Paradoxically, it must be a morally pure vanguard yet in certain cases—here again we have the language of the *Catechism*—engage in lying and deception, particularly against rival revolutionary groups: "Societies whose aims are near to ours must be forced to merge with our Society or, at least, must be subordinated to it without their knowledge. . . . All this cannot be achieved only by propagating the truth; cunning, diplomacy, deceit are necessary. Jesuit methods or even entanglements can be used for this. . . . Thus this simple law must be the basis of our activity: truth, honesty, mutual trust between all Brothers and towards any man who is capable of becoming a Brother—lies, cunning, entanglement, and, if necessary, violence towards enemies." Bakunin's methods, then, are not so far removed from Nechaev's. The chief difference, perhaps, is that Nechaev actually put them into practice—including blackmail and murder, directed against friends and enemies alike—while Bakunin limited himself to mere words or to such relatively harmless mystifications as the worldwide revolutionary alliance in whose name he pretended to speak.

5. Prison

After their falling-out in the summer of 1870, Bakunin and Nechaev never saw each other again. Nechaev went to London, where he published a journal called *Obshchina* (The Commune), in which he demanded from Bakunin and Ogarev the remainder of the Bakhmetiev fund. After visiting Paris on the eve of the Commune, he returned to London, then went again to Switzerland, where he eked out a precarious existence by his father's old trade of sign painting, and where he was sheltered for a time by Italian disciples of Mazzini. The tsarist government, however, was determined to get him, spending more money and effort on his pursuit than on that of any other nineteenth-century revolutionary. Bakunin sent Nechaev a warning that the authorities were on his trail, but Nechaev ignored it, convinced that his old mentor was merely "trying to draw [me] away from Zürich". Finally, on August 14, 1872, Nechaev was betrayed to the Swiss police by Adolf Stempkowski, a former Polish revolutionary who had become a Russian spy. Soon afterwards he was extradited to Russia as a common murderer, in spite of vigorous protests by his fellow expatriates (Bakunin among them) that he was in fact a political refugee.

On November 2, 1872, Bakunin expressed his sympathy for Nechaev in a remarkable letter to Ogarev, which deserves to be quoted at length: "I pity him deeply. No one ever did me, and intentionally, as much harm as he did, but I pity him all the same. He was a man of rare energy, and when we met there burned in him a very ardent and a very pure flame for our poor, oppressed people; our historical and current national misery caused him real suffering. At that time his external behaviour was unsavoury enough, but his inner self had not been soiled. It was his authoritarianism and his unbridled wilfulness which, very regrettably and through his ignorance together with his

Machiavellianism and Jesuitical methods, finally plunged him irretrievably into the mire. . . . However, an inner voice tells me that Nechaev, who is lost forever and certainly knows that he is lost, will now call forth from the depths of his being, warped and soiled but far from being base or common, all his primitive energy and courage. He will perish like a hero and this time he will betray nothing and no one. Such is my belief. We shall see if I am right."

The rest of Nechaev's story can be briefly told. When tried in Moscow in January 1873, he bore himself with unbending defiance. "I refuse to be a slave of your tyrannical government," he declared. "I do not recognize the Emperor and the laws of this country." He would not answer any questions and was finally dragged from the dock shouting "Down with despotism!" After being sentenced to twenty years at hard labour, he declared himself "a son of the people" and invoked Razin and Pugachev "who strung up the nobles as in France they sent them to the guillotine". At the ceremony of "civil execution" following his trial he shouted: "Down with the tsar! Long live freedom! Long live the Russian people!"

The last ten years of Nechaev's life were spent in solitary confinement in the Peter and Paul fortress, from which he had falsely claimed to have escaped in 1869. His behaviour in prison, as Max Nomad has said, was "one of the great episodes of revolutionary history". When General Potapov of the secret police visited his cell and offered him leniency if he would serve as a spy, Nechaev struck him across the face, drawing blood. For the next two years his hands and feet remained in chains until the flesh began to rot.

Yet Nechaev's spirit was unbroken. Indeed, even in prison he was able to exert his charismatic fascination over others, winning over his own guards, who began to call him their "eagle". He got them to read the illegal journal of the People's Will group and even taught them how to write letters in code. With their help, in fact, he was able to communicate with his fellow prisoners and eventually with the outside world, sending letters to the central committee of the People's Will on the eve of their assassination of Alexander II. Vera Figner tells in her memoirs of their excitement when they learned that Nechaev was still alive and in the nearby Peter and Paul fortress rather than in

Siberia to which he had been condemned. Their plans to free him were deferred, however, in order to concentrate their energies against the tsar. After the assassination, the People's Will was suppressed and Nechaev's relationship with his guards was discovered owing to the treachery of a fellow inmate. As a result, more than sixty prison employees were arrested and tried, while Nechaev himself was subjected to a murderous regimen which before long broke down his health. He died of consumption and scurvy on November 21, 1882, at the age of 35, perishing "like a hero" as Bakunin had predicted.

6. Conclusion

What then may we conclude about Nechaev? Was he an unmitigated scoundrel without any redeeming qualities, or a devoted revolutionary who has been unjustly maligned by his detractors? To some extent, of course, he remains an enigma, and a full-scale biography, based on all available sources, would be a fascinating and worthwhile undertaking. Meanwhile, however, certain judgments can be made. On the positive side, his courage and dedication cannot be denied. He was endowed, according to Sazhin, with "colossal energy, fanatical devotion to the revolution, a character of steel, and an indefatigable capacity for work". He lived a life of poverty and extreme self-denial. Of the money which he obtained from the Bakhmetiev fund he did not spend a penny on himself. Nor can the genuineness of his revolutionary fervour or his hatred of privilege and exploitation be doubted. He paid for it by being shut up in the dungeon for nearly a third of his life, a fate which he bore with an endurance and nobility that are unsurpassed in the annals of revolutionary martyrdom.

But his selfless dedication carried a harsh and ruthless stamp. It was untempered by the warmth and human compassion which Bakunin possessed in such abundance. Nechaev won his influence, rather, by his fierce energy, his calculated immoralism and his boundless hatred of the establishment and of all whom he considered his enemies. His chief faults, wrote Lev Deutsch, were "an infinite confidence in his own infallibility, a total scorn of human beings, and a systematic application of the principle that the end justifies the means". He regarded all men and women as mere tools in the revolutionary struggle, thereby stripping them of their personal dignity, indeed of their very identity. From the beginning of his career, wrote Albert Camus in *The Rebel*, Nechaev "never ceased to suborn the students

around him, Bakunin himself, the revolutionary refugees, and finally the guards in his prison". He thought nothing of bringing less uncompromising radicals under police suspicion in order to involve them more deeply in his own conspiratorial activities. He raised revolutionary expediency to an absolute good, before which all accepted morality must retreat. In the interests of the revolution, of which he himself was to be sole judge, every action was justified, every crime was legitimate, however repugnant it might be. He himself practised the theft, blackmail, and murder that he preached to his fellow conspirators. He practised them, moreover, on friends as well as enemies. "He deceived everyone he met," as E. H. Carr has observed, "and when he was no longer able to deceive them, his power was gone." His originality, as Camus pointed out, lay in "justifying the violence done to one's brother". Thus he ultimately foreshadows, on however small a scale, the mass murders of Stalin in the name of revolutionary necessity.

In short, while Bakunin, whatever his failings, was essentially a libertarian, Nechaev, whatever his virtues, was essentially an authoritarian. His real mentors were not Fourier, Proudhon, and Bakunin, but Robespierre, Babeuf, and Tkachev, whose Jacobin principles he pushed to their ultimate extent. Far from being an anarchist, he was an apostle of political expediency, concerned with the means of conspiracy and with centralized organization rather than with the goal of a stateless society. His Jacobinism and Machiavellianism clashed fundamentally with the libertarian spirit, surrounding anarchism with an aura of brutality and ruthlessness that was foreign to its basic humanity. In Nechaev's hands, anarchism, the ideal of human freedom and dignity, was soiled, debased, and finally distorted beyond recognition.

Yet Nechaev had a profound influence upon the revolutionary movement, among anarchists and non-anarchists alike. Though revealed as a murderer of a fellow revolutionary, not to say a thief and a blackmailer, his misdeeds were held by some to be offset by his zeal and self-sacrifice. Thus the People's Will raised his courage and dedication above the darker aspects of his career; and Lenin, who admired his organizational talents and selfless devotion to the cause, praised him as a "revolutionary titan". During the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 the image of Nechaev gripped more than a few young militants of the

extreme Left, who, in their passion for revolutionary conspiracy, their terrorist methods, and their extreme hostility towards intellectuals, bore their mentor's peculiar stamp.

In addition, such contemporary groups as the Black Panthers, the Black September, the Weathermen, the Red Army Fraction, and the Symbionese Liberation Army have employed the methods of Nechaev—including indiscriminate terror and the subordination of means to ends—in the name of the revolutionary cause. The Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver tells us in *Soul on Ice* that he "fell in love" with *The Catechism of the Revolutionary* and took it as a revolutionary bible, incorporating its principles into his everyday life by employing "tactics of ruthlessness in my dealings with everyone with whom I came into contact". (The *Catechism* was published as a pamphlet in 1969 by the Black Panthers of Berkeley with an introduction by Cleaver.) The Symbionese Liberation Army has been charged with the assassination (using cyanide-tipped bullets) of a superintendent of schools in Oakland, California, and some members have broken with the organization because of its "devotion to violence and its 'egotistical' leadership's insistence on making secret decisions". Even the murder of Ivanov, strangely enough, has had its modern counterparts in the slaying of an alleged informer by the Black Panther group in New Haven in 1969, and in the massacre of 1972 by the leader of the United Red Army in Japan of no less than fourteen members of his group for violations of "revolutionary discipline".

But the tactics of "Nechaevism" have also provoked widespread revulsion within the revolutionary movement. In his own circle in St. Petersburg at the end of the 1860s Nechaev already found opponents in such libertarian socialists as Mark Natanson, Feliks Volkhovsky, German Lopatin, and Michael Negreskul. The Chaikovsky Circle of the 1870s—including Kropotkin and Kravchinsky as well as Natanson, Volkhovsky, and Lopatin—also recoiled from Nechaev's Jacobin methods, his cynical immoralism, and his dictatorial party organization. In contrast to his People's Justice, they sought to create an atmosphere of confidence and trust and to found an organization based on mutual aid and mutual respect among its members. Repelled by Nechaev's Machiavellianism, they argued that no end, however noble, could fail to be corrupted by such monstrous means; and they asked,

like Bakunin, whether the training of revolutionary groups along the lines proposed by Nechaev might not create an arrogant elite of power-seekers who would give the people what they *ought* to want, whether they in fact did so or not. Thus they ranged themselves with the libertarian socialism of Herzen, Bakunin, and Lavrov against the authoritarian revolutionism of Ishutin, Tkachev, and Nechaev, who, they felt, could not inspire a true socialist revolution because they lacked a true socialist morality.

The identical criticism was later levelled against the Bolsheviks by Peter Kropotkin, on whose lips, said Maria Goldsmith, "the word 'Nechaevism' was always a strong rebuke". As a member of the Chaikovsky Circle, Kropotkin decried all self-contained associations of "professional revolutionaries", with their clandestine schemes, ruling committees, iron discipline, and subordination of means to ends. He insisted that "a morally developed individuality must be the foundation of every organization". For Kropotkin the ends and the means were inseparable, and he was inflexible in his opposition to all tactics that conflicted with his principles and goals. Nor would Bakunin, in his most far-seeing moments, have disagreed. As he wrote to Sazhin less than two years before his death: "Realize at length that nothing living and firm can be built upon Jesuitical trickery, that revolutionary activity aiming to succeed must not seek its support in base and petty passions, and that no revolution can achieve victory without lofty and conspicuously clear ideas."

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Two recent works shed considerable light on what Franco Venturi has called the "complex and obscure" relationship between Bakunin and Nechaev. *Michel Bakounine et ses relations avec Sergej Necaev, 1870-1872* (Leiden, 1971), edited by Arthur Lehning of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, presents a careful documentary record of their relations from 1870 to 1872 as well as of Nechaev's pursuit by the Swiss and tsarist police and his ultimate extradition to Russia. A volume in the monumental *Archives Bakounine* series, it is distinguished by its lavish production (with portraits of Bakunin and Nechaev and facsimiles of key documents) and meticulous editing, with a solid introduction and copious notes by Lehning, the foremost authority on Bakunin. With the forthcoming publication of a companion volume covering 1869, it will constitute the fullest and most reliable source on the subject. *Violence dans la violence: le débat Bakounine-Necaev* (Paris, 1973), a smaller volume by Professor Michael Confino of Tel Aviv University, contains most of the important documents as well as a stimulating introduction that provides a reconstruction of the Nechaev affair, its causes, progress, and consequences. Surprisingly, neither volume contains the diary of Natalie Herzen, with its revealing portrait of Nechaev, which was first published by Confino in 1969 in the *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, but it will fortunately be included in Confino's *Daughter of a Revolutionary: Natalie Herzen and the Bakunin/Nechaev Circle*, which is scheduled to appear in print later this year.

A number of early biographies of Bakunin have been recently reissued in paperback editions, most notably E. H. Carr's *Michael Bakunin* (London, 1937) and H. E. Kaminski's *Bakounine: la vie d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1938). The most exhaustive study, however, remains Max Nettlau's three-volume *Michael Bakunin*:

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